

# Dangerous Games in a Well-Lit Space

Natalia Isaeva

Anatoli Vassiliev, that legendary theatre director – a neo-romantic and a frantic avant-gardist, a passionate Russian orthodox and a totally irreverent iconoclast, someone standing for free improvised spontaneity and at the same time a theatre artisan ever bent on constructing tricks of a meticulously calculated precision... So many different sides, so many hypostases, one could say – so many masks. Historians of theatre usually define three distinctive periods of his creative development: the initial period of ‘*psychological structures*’ of his unforgettable *Cerceau*, that of the so-called ‘*play structures*’, started with *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and that of his most recent experimenting with ‘*verbal structures*’, leading him directly towards quasi-mediaeval mystery shows (*Lamentations of Jeremiah*, *Medea-material*, *Iliad*). One might wonder, though, whether any of those preceding periods are ever completely abandoned and left behind during that relentless movement, during that forward thrust. Vassiliev himself is more and more often talking about some ‘universal structures’; it seems as if even psychology finally finds its place (however rather limited and narrowly defined) within some all-embracing and coherent unity.

To my mind, Vassiliev became disappointed in psychological constructions à la Stanislavsky because they usually lead us to the vision of the world which is completely predictable and well-calculated; starting from the *initial event*, that is, from the circumstances and preconditions of a human situation presented at the beginning of the play, a character continues his journey through the rigmarole of evolving situations. On that road he feels himself being pushed from behind – in fact, he is already formed and defined in advance by that preliminary event, acting as a helpless prisoner of that causal chain, as well as of his own nature. One might also reproach the psychological point of view for a certain lukewarm sentimentality, but Vassiliev, from the very beginning of his artistic career, was perfectly able to avoid that shortcoming – instead of showing open attractions or conflicts between characters he opts for a kind of parallel interaction. Much later, in his Italian book *A un unico lettore* he will find a definition for that particular coexistence of the protagonists on the stage when different reasons, different logic of actions are able to develop simultaneously: he will speak of *free connection*, that is, of an almost independent entwining of themes or melodies that might remind us of the development of a fugue – that musical composition was already quite evident in *The First Version of Vassa Zheleznova*, in *The Grown-up Daughter of a Young Man*, and, especially, in *The Cerceau*.

And this almost tangible warmth, this deep affinity bringing together human beings, something that alone can explain and excuse their actions from the point of view of a psychological approach – this warm complicity that so often becomes our only hope in the tribulations of everyday life. For Vassiliev it does not amount

to much; it is nothing but a sweet delusion, a kind of warm soup, insipid jelly where we bathe through the whole of our life (as he likes to repeat condescendingly, 'just a nostalgic tune of a weeping sax'). However, if one is brave enough to go to the end, to draw all impending conclusions, one has to admit: in order to enrich those famous psychological structures, in order to scrape out that initial event for everything that could be hidden inside, we have to plunge deeply into the darkest layers of the subconscious mind of the drama agents. Only down there, in the primal vortex of our most shameful passions, our most obscure complexes, we can find real reasons for the emergence of actions and sentiments. Vassiliev, himself heavily indebted to the Russian school of psychological theatre, is nevertheless warning against the inherent danger stalking every actor when he tries to identify fully with his character: if he is really sincere, really open, but at the same time does not know how to protect himself, he is inevitably drawn towards essentially pathological and destructive states.

On the one hand, there is that dizzy spontaneity which is always so attractive in a psychological improvisation – you let yourself go, you are carried away, almost intoxicated with the stream of emotions, passions, sudden whims (all that process becomes truly seductive in the practice of *'étude'*, so prominent in Russian theatre school). And Vassiliev is someone who knew how to master that technique – with years of experience he became a real virtuoso in those psychological games played out on the stage, always trying to push them to the limit, folding and unfolding the tiniest details according to his will. At the same time, he is the first to recognise that apparent freedom as a delusion, a kind of myopia or cowardice on our part – in short, as something that prevents us from seeing clearly. Everything here is already prescribed in advance, everything is already limited by the very nature of our emotions, by the very character of our movements – even the most sublime, the most spontaneous ones: they all belong to the sphere of nature and so are nothing but yet another link in the chain of causes and effects. For Vassiliev, nature is always something essentially mechanic – an intricate toy, completely predictable, a toy that was wound and put into motion following a rigid set of rules (let's say, something close to Isaac Newton's notion of universe) – which at the same time remains essentially dead. Nature is dead itself and it is bound to kill us as well when our turn comes; the root of all our exciting pleasures is obscure, the source of all our brilliant exaltations is rather dark and soggy.

On the contrary, play structures always orient us towards the final point, towards the concluding part of the composition. Now it's no longer specific traits of a character that determine the journey, it's the real person (*'persona'*) of an actor that embarks on that adventure and wants to play it out until the end – whatever the price. And the *'main event'* where one expects to arrive at the end of the play is regarded more like an opening, an unveiling of some enigma, a solution of a complicated puzzle. If the initial event pushes a character forward without allowing him to deviate or digress from a set of implacable preconditions, the main event pulls an actor on, beckoning to him from afar, making him a sign to approach, to hurry on towards an unknown denouement.

In order to be able to move, an actor must first of all shift the inner centre of all his actions, placing it in front of himself, thus creating an object to play with.

Anything can become an object of this game, including that human nature which was previously discarded as a possible element of the theatre action – during that journey anything might serve as a ball to play, as a toy, as a point of contact between the actors. And all the time, on the most difficult roads, in the most obscure passages, there is that distant light which beckons to us, which draws us to it... Vassiliev usually specifies that we are dealing here with an inversed perspective somewhat akin to that of a Byzantine icon, where, inside a magnetic field of faith, the lines of force come from the inside of the image to reach out to the spectator; a Russian theologian and historian of art Pavel Florensky (and, more recently, a physicist and philosopher Boris Rauchenbach) speaks about that dark shining of a pure idea, which, at first staying hidden or even jealously guarded from view, gradually starts moving from the background of the picture towards us, eventually looming larger than any object on the forefront. For Vassiliev it also means replacing the past and the present (in other words, the initial event of the play) with the future (that main event yet to come, yet to happen).

And there, on that unknown territory, the game always remains free owing to the strange way the main event presents itself. While Florensky prefers to talk about a pure idea, which eventually imposes itself in all its indisputable power, Vassiliev envisages instead a surprising revelation, which is completely unexpected. It's that idea itself which turns a somersault, or, to be more precise, it's that idea which hides itself, which evades us, which cannot stand being named or defined. We can play with such nonchalance, with such carelessness – one might even say with such lightness – just because right from the start that idea amuses itself by tricking us and leading us astray. There is an elusive territory that opens in front of us, a territory where every definition essentially becomes a negation, where all effort of understanding inevitably becomes an apophatic exercise. We are all free because we play inside that fundamental element of cosmic illusion (from the ontological point of view it's something like the veil of *maya*, that fundamental ignorance which for the Hinduists is the same as *lila* or theatrical, illusory play of creation). In that way, every stage representation becomes a detective story with a totally unexpected twist at the end. Hence that joyful astonishment when you finally come to the unexpected solution of a puzzle – that astonishment that overwhelms simultaneously both an actor and a spectator who shares the same mystery. And hence that apprehension, that uneasiness, that vague frisson we feel during the whole journey when we suddenly feel a vague premonition: that is the distant light which beckons to us, the light which stays invisible, the light you can only feel – something that touches us from afar. Instead of real understanding – that almost tactile, tangible sensation... One could add, in brackets, that here one finds a partial explanation of that strangely physical and sensual quality of some of Vassiliev's most metaphysical shows.

So, on the one hand, there is the apophatic way of negation which exists, that way of absolute play which should be turned upside down and negated by the final event... That game can well embrace more or less extensive fragments of psychological narration – any card can be played with total sincerity, with all the implied risks of a psychological improvisation, it's just that during the game we already come to suspect that the truth will ultimately have quite a strange shape. On the other hand, when using similar paradigms, one should foresee some cataphatic

way that could lead us directly towards that invisible light, towards that black sun of the main event; and inside those play structures we find verbal mechanisms with their own particular functions.

According to Vassiliev, who is always suspicious of any meaning born from the narrative story, the content is usually transmitted to us through oral intonation. So, in order to eliminate that ordinary, 'horizontal' intonation, we have first of all to disregard the normal accents of everyday speech; only in that way we can come to the primordial force of speech regarded as pure energy, as a kind of phonic matter which can be found at the origins of the world. During these last years Vassiliev has worked out a special technique founded upon the mastering of respiration, a technique strangely close to some Oriental practices (we can find really astonishing parallels in Kashmir Shaivism, in some Taoist schools, or in the tradition of Byzantine hesychasm). Owing to *affirmative intonation*, elaborated by Vassiliev, we find that energy of the speech (a Shaiva theologian could say: we meet Vac, or the Goddess of Speech, preached by Utpaladeva or Abhinavagupta) which starts to unfold itself, which starts to affect us directly, even against our will, over and beyond any usual tame meaning of ordinary words.

The first exercises, the first experiences with that radiating phonetic matter were started some ten years ago, with the first approaches towards *Amphitryon* of Moliere and *Stone Guest* of Pushkin. And as always, it was not a case of some elaborate theory being put into practice – there was a normal theatre activity which continued, there was a new show to be staged, but this time one tried to attack the spoken word differently, one tried to fold and unfold the phrases, the words, even the syllables, sometimes using singing as a possible support, so that gradually there was the growing sensation of having found a possible vehicle to transmit a new content.

*Amphitryon*, finally staged at Comédie Française in 2002: a story, which right from the start is founded on that double game, on mirror reflections. White radiance, blue shadows inside a shell: what do we find there, in all those turns and secret passages? Why, of course, it's Jupiter, in love with Alcène, who assumes the appearance of her husband, Amphitryon. The night is extended in accordance with the strength and skill of his passion, while Amphitryon's servant, Sosie, is temporarily replaced by Mercury. It's Molière, long before Pirandello, who is again and again teasing us with the same question: "If you are me, then who am I?" But there is also Vassiliev, who tries to create his own construction – as usual, a little upside down; for him it's yet another story dealing with a human effort to reach God, or at least to attract his attention. In the middle of the stage we immediately see a two-storied tower – Tower of Babylon, or the Tower of Pisa, – something that cannot quite hold on its own, something frail, and puny, and intensely fragile: Jacob's ladder, a semi-transparent boat of all our lost dreams. Something that incidentally reminds us of that new building of Vassiliev's theatre on Sretenka street in Moscow – white suites of spaces that are interlacing with each other, that pour out into each other, without ever stopping, without ever being limited...

White cylinders of that tower in the centre, inside one can see a staircase and a mast (a maypole at the market place?), there are cords and ropes of a boat, flags,

archaic kimonos in raw silk – off-white, a little too large for the actors, almost architectural volumes inside that space. Generally speaking, there are two main colours: the white and the blue, reflecting the tension that always exists between two conflicting ideas – the faith and the reason. “If you are me, then who am I?” – in other words, what can I regard as a support for my “self”, which exists in a perpetual flux, which changes, and trembles, and suffers? What should I choose as a foundation? Should it be my reason that immediately provides the necessary weight, the stable centre inside my ego, or, rather, a quivering arrow of faith, with all its feathers, with its razor-sharp point, this arrow which is always directed towards heaven? That arrow of faith that resembles more an arrow of love, of erotic desire – one can feel and recognise it for the first time owing to that irresistible urge to overcome oneself, to transgress the limits of one’s nature: I desire someone else because I am not sufficient for myself.

For Vassiliev, the whole idea of the play consists in that wish of Amphitryon to touch, to trace some new entity beyond all tame, accepted virtues of law. In other words, at the beginning of the show Jupiter is not engaged in the story at all; according to the theatre director, it’s Amphitryon himself, too clever for his own good, who tries to get from his wife something different, something he never had before. Amphitryon, who has already made his choice, who opted for reason, suddenly feels that strange sensation of inner want. Apparently, he’s got everything: loyalty, generosity, friendship – even love, of that ordinary and natural kind – in short, he’s literally got everything within reason. It’s quite an ideal of classic antiquity with its civil and moral virtues, stable social foundations. But already there are new times that approach – the turning point, when Saint Paul will say: if the world is founded on justice, we are all lost... And for Amphitryon, for that hero who’s chosen for his war flag the white colour of reason, the coming of this time is much too disturbing: that is what sucks his heart blood, that is the vague uneasiness which torments and bites him from inside.

One cannot find a better metaphor for the intricacies of faith than erotic love, and that is what Amphitryon demands of his wife – perhaps hoping to get from her something he is incapable of himself, that is, the ability to open up, to cry or love up to the limit. One should not forget, eventually, that in French drama tradition all these erotic games can best be traced within the space of language. Of course, the original French text might at first glance seem to be too analytical, too dry, with a lucidity and clarity a bit too monotonous. At the same time, it gives a participant in the dialogue a chance to rebound from a trampoline of repetitions, it gives a possibility to turn and lose himself inside a labyrinth of rhetorical means, inside that elaborate sophistry which holds by its crystallic net the very element of a living speech. That is where one really starts to hear that ‘affirmative intonation’ which, according to Vassiliev, should find its place in theatre. The speech, hitched up to the degree of true poetry, is being articulated as if from one and the same single point, from that centre which is placed beyond the limits of psychology, beyond human whims and relationships. The feverish fire of that speech, its utmost heat burns out every personal element: one can hear a blurred indistinct voice, the words themselves are separated by strange syncopes, they touch each other like blind beasts, they turn away, and look into each other again like slivers of a broken mirror. French culture is infinitely more verbal and rational than the

Russian one, but there is a trait which we share together: it's a capacity to be intoxicated with words, a capacity to be carried away by the crude force of the language itself; we know only too well the terrible temptation of a poetical word, the power of its cutting energy.

In his *Amphitryon* Vassiliev has found a striking visual image for that free flight of speech. There is a monologue that starts, a monologue addressed to a partner – actually, there is a rhetorical exercise which is launched, there is that potent magic of speech which starts to affect us, starts to shake us with a strange insistence – and a moment comes when an actor suddenly jumps up from his chair, when he runs up, to the upper edge of the tower. He grasps one of the ropes that are hanging from above and begins to run around the rim of the tower; just a few more steps and he is already flying – here it is, the suspension, the flight of the speech! Later, after the first night, *Le Figaro* complained about that irreverential treatment of Molière, but, frankly speaking, the great playwright constructed his phrases in pretty much the same way: in his comedies one invariably finds the same basic element – a long rhetorical monologue which oscillates, which turns around as a huge wheel, gradually accumulating the energy of that mechanical movement... All those amorous quarrels between lovers are constructed more or less on the lines of juridical disputes in the court of law, on the lines of scholarly disputes of mediaeval philosophers. The only difference is that here a spectator is not obliged to follow all those logical arguments, rather, he should be susceptible to the growing pathos, to the rising sound of passion, to the sound which is born not from the psychology of characters but from the recitation itself.

The inner passion of the speech, oh yes, but one should not forget that the accumulated momentum can well lead us astray, that the retreating wave can well leave us on some forgotten beach. For the French the best safeguard is that rationalism, that dry Cartesian scepticism, which is a reverse side of that verbal culture. But thinking of Descartes, one should not lose from sight another great contemporary of Molière. Blaise Pascal used to say about all those who love to be drunk with words: “Qu'ils en soulent et qu'ils y crèvent!”. Actually, all those games are quite dangerous, because the sweaty horse of passion (in Indian mythology and, much later, in Tantric philosophy, one might talk about ‘vahana’, or a suitable vehicle, a mount that might deliver us to God or salvation) is capable of carrying its rider anywhere. And Vassiliev, for whom metaphysical ideas are always regarded as something one might touch, one might really feel through direct tactile experience (‘meta-physical’ entity as a kind of very fine, subtle matter, obtained through alchemical sublimation) defines the degree of that freedom with a lot of precision. This free flight, almost a circus trick, almost an acrobatic number – but all characters nevertheless stay attached to all those ropes, they fly around that outer circle of the tower. The ropes are hanging from above, they are tied somewhere – someone, over there, has given us that permission to jump and fly from time to time. And yet another visual metaphor: inside that narrow semi-transparent tower the actors can also move, going up and down, following the steps on the central pole. Just like a bucket that goes down into the well – someone is holding it with his hand, drawing more or less water at the source... We can feel real passion, we can make an enormous effort, but the final result never depends on us; it is always something that is given, bestowed upon us.

It's quite natural that a human being who has already spent so much strength trying to master all those rational constructions, hesitates before conceding the ultimate truth: his destiny does not depend on him. A slightly ridiculous, naïve picture, as if taken from a mediaeval show: a combat between a man and God, a chivalrous tournament between Amphitryon and Jupiter, that last battle between faith and reason – a white flag of a warrior against a blue divine cloth. We can read here the fight of Jacob with an angel, but also the complaints of Job, ultimately, all that eternal story of divine jealousy with its one and only demand: abandon everything and hold on to love alone. And that obstinate wish of a man to make count all his heroic deeds, all his actions, all his little brownie points that he acquired himself. We are quite fortunate, however, and no just battle is possible here: God is going to cheat again – whether we want it or not – he is going to cheat in that battle, and cover all our little human vanities with a blue wing of his great cloak of mercy instead of a white paper sheet of some juridical document...

Towards the end, there is a solution that Jupiter himself suggests to Amphitryon: he feels he had enough of watching those games from above and now it is his turn to intervene. The ropes are pulled once again, the tower turns, and we can see that from the other side it is crowned with a cupola. Up there, it is Jupiter who is standing in one of the arches, he starts to speak with his voice of thunder, his speech is long, much too long, he has to calm down, console all that assembly of people who got lost in complex constructions and double games, in their own loyalties and loves, all those tricks and illusory reflections of faith. He speaks on – and then we suddenly notice that his feet no longer touch the edge of the tower, that he is floating, suspended on air without any support, without any rope to hold him...

Only after that temptation, only after human cleverness had already found that crack running between faith and reason, it became possible for God to address people directly, promising them a different contract. The main vow: Alcmène would give birth to a hero, a half-god Heracles – in other words, the mixing of two natures would become possible. There is a silver cross that goes from hand to hand (Amphitryon had to fight a war in order to win that insignia, while Alcmène got it for almost nothing – for a night of love), there is a cup to be drunk together. All of that still does not mean much, apart from a distant promise. And at the back of the stage there is a pastoral which starts with the sound of the bell, there is that childish and naïve joy of all those people who already know: the time will come when they are going to be placed next to God – as his friends, as his beloved ones, as his lovers – no longer as slaves. An accordion that plays, musicians who come forward to mix with the crowd, simple games and amusements of a marketplace, a giant bee that beats its wings, making circles above the general merriment... And Amphitryon who is left alone, sitting in front of a short curtain, Amphitryon who does not take part in all that jubilation. For him the crack goes right across his heart. It's not some vain pretence but a real wound, a fight that still goes on inside his very soul. Something that was so easy to achieve for Alcmène proves to be much more hard for a phallic masculine spirit, always a victim of its own pride, its own dream of independence. What to do – faith (or love) never promises any real consolations, any gentle pleasures, and the moment when you give yourself away can be probably counted among the most terrifying ones. (One might remember *La Lectrice conquise* of Magritte: what we see is not some young girl submerged in

a sweet dream, attracted by a nice story, – not at all. The mouth of that woman is deformed by a scream, she is someone who is tortured, almost mortally wounded by the sheer excitement of complete surrender.)

The first versions of *Medea-material* of Heiner Müller date back to 2001, the time of the Theatre Olympiad in Moscow and that of the *Traversée* of *Académie Experimentale du Théâtre* in Paris; one could later see the ultimate version during the Avignon Festival in 2002. The spectators who arrived at the Chapel of Grey Penitents where the show was staged were first of all confronted with a huge screen suspended in the centre, marking the space like a Chinese folding screen, like a theatre curtain or a sail. In silence, one could look at the sea that kept beating, wave after wave – one could feel the infinite horizon, the insistent oscillation of images, a slight dizziness... The insistence of desire, the relentless pace of passion which echoes in all of us, which is so recognisable by that seasickness, by that nausea of being on the swing. The actress, Valérie Dréville, enters that space. She is wearing a dress of a simple geometrical design, a dress of blue, yellow, green squares. The Queen of Colchis, not a magnificent belle – no, a creature of exceptional frailty, fragility... We can see her light brown hair, pale skin, narrow wrists. She sits down in front of the screen and starts her long monologue addressed at that traitor, Jason. To the left we can see a white enamel basin – one of those things that are so functional and at the same time so frightening, in fact, one of those things we prefer never to encounter in real life – something that belongs to a surgery (to the anatomical ‘theatre’?), or to a dentist chair. A receptacle for all used bandages, all soiled tissues, all little cotton swabs drenched in blood. To the right, there are glasses and boxes of a totally different nature – modern cosmetic bottles or, possibly, ancient phials and jars for oils and perfumes. Medea, who is sitting right in front of us, removes the lids, her quick fingers take a little cream out of a box, she starts to put it on her face, on her throat. A woman who hates to get older, a woman who tries to cling to the remnants of passing beauty? Not really, not quite... The cream is applied in such a strange way, its layer is much too thick, much too uneven – it is used not as a salutary unction, but rather like layers of plaster, layers of whitewash that start to dry on the skin.

And the monologue goes on, with the same relentless rhythm, the same blows of a hammer that hits hard, like a pulsing of our own heart, like a phallic energy of a sexual union, like a wave that continues to beat against the shore. “You owe me a brother”, she insists, let’s measure up our destinies, let’s bargain dead bodies... A strange reproach, so unjust, so hard to bear – wasn’t it her, the queen of Colchis, who had slaughtered and carved up the boy (and on the screen the seagulls are still trying to find their prey in the waves), and then, later, after Apsirtes, there was Pelius, to whom she promised eternal youth attainable through death? It’s not the first time she is playing with the knife... And now, slowly, she starts to unbutton her dress, always speaking, reproaching, remembering; finally she is sitting there completely naked with the legs forcibly opened up by the ultimate surge of passion.

The dress is thrown into the basin, that dry dress, from which the spasm of her hand presses water – down there, into the rubbish bin, into the dirty banana peels, down there goes the soiled fabrics of all our lost habits and conventions, of all her

past stories. And here is the flame that starts, here is that fire which is going to devour the last traces of decomposed ties and relationships. She takes out of the same magic box little pieces of white gauze, attaching them to her breasts, to her exposed, vulnerable belly: one can imagine under all those torn bandages a multitude of tiny wounds. The naked body as a map, as a blueprint for all future carvings and transformations. The naked body as a mummy prepared for a sarcophagus, as a new glistening body of a snake one can discern through torn fragments of the dead skin. And Medea had some family ties with serpents – protectors of underground waters...

Something that stays deeply ingrained in your memory after the show is over – it's not really the murder of children (two little dolls filled with rice are torn apart and thrown into the fire), it's not the mad rage of an insulted woman, it's not the horrible revenge. Rather, you confront an archaic myth that gradually evolves right in front of you. On the screen the sea has already become grey – it's covered with the ashes of all burnt-out passions – but even that dull surface irradiates red from inside. The sea, which has drunk too much blood, far too much do digest and dissolve. And Medea is still there, fixing us with her immobile eyes from under heavy serpentine lids – Medea, ready to slip into a new existence (she will continue to marry heroes, she will give birth to another son, and even in the kingdom of Hades she will become a wife of Achilles). She is unable to stop, she goes on. Without shedding tears for the past, without fear. She has already left behind her used skin, she has accomplished the rite of purification, having burnt down her former nature. Someone who – using the text of Müller – can say about herself: "I, neither animal nor human; I, neither a man nor a woman; I – Medea". Someone who has completely forgotten the past – but only after having passed through that flame, through the all-devouring fire of the Verb...

And finally, the most recent show, that of 2004 – *Iliad, Canto 23*. A long way to go, with three principal actors dead during ten years of work, a total change of concept, of approach, of the visual image, of the phonic matter. The text chosen by Vassiliev is telling us the story of the burial of Patrocles and of the military games organised around his funeral fire. A truly elaborate show that exists in a complex multilayered script of images, gestures, and sounds. One cannot forget a huge dark-blue flag of the river Scamandre that floats above, covering most of the stage. Or black birds, vultures that dance on long poles over the whole of the battlefield, over the dead bodies of warriors... Later, the same poles will be transformed into oars – and here are the Achean boats swaying to the rhythm of the rose of the winds... The funeral fire of Patrocles, visualised as a thick rope folded in a circle, a rope with a multitude of scarlet threads falling down when that fire would not burn... And all those military fights meticulously choreographed in all their rhythmic precision... Since the universe here is already organised and lined like a schoolboy's notebook. And one can always hear the same chanting intonation that corresponds so perfectly to the Russian version of a hexametre verse. Each fragment is put into motion with the same introductory line: "Ya – a! Ya – a!", that is: "I!" – I, Achilles, I find myself here, in front of you, I am a hero, and I am placed inside that battle, that is, inscribed into that precisely calculated place, I breathe in the same rhythm with the whole of the world, that is all my life: a word – a breath – a killing – yet another point on the path of the fate which guides me on...

The ancient Greeks, the Achaeans, but a somewhat astonished spectator immediately recognises the foundations of all those military exercises: these are Chinese martial arts of *tai-chi* and *u-shu*. And it was not some refined exoticism that attracted Vassiliev to the latest fashionable trend, rather, that choice reveals some substantial need. In principle, all military games use as a base a succession of extremely formalised gestures – one can choose any tradition, any perfected style polished to the last inch. A gesture as a well-calculated spasm – an instant of that union, almost a moment of amorous copulation with an enemy, a paroxysm of blinding pain – one pays a debt, one grasps, and immediately abandons, a single sign, a single gesture – that is quite enough. A military ballet, an elaborated choreography of death – only the fountains of blood à la Tarantino are missing. Incidentally, there is something else, much more important: the image of that Orient which always holds things apart, isolated, atomised – oh yes, we all survive thanks to nature, but we are not really linked with each other. Each planet faithfully follows its own orbit, but mine has nothing to do with yours: we are never going to touch. We all swim inside the same fluid substance of *chi* but we never really meet together.

There is probably one and only thing which we might find lacking, something a perfect mastering of martial arts is unable to offer, and that is the feeling of danger. Ability, joy, extreme concentration of actors who fight with genuine arms – all that still does not give us that little shiver of suspense, the mastership is simply much too evident. It becomes difficult to distinguish between real combat and juvenile games around the body of Patrocles – everywhere we can see the same dance, the same virtuosity... And meanwhile, all those games continue on a thin film covering a gaping abyss...

At first one does not see clearly but gradually something dawns on us – there are still the same rhythmical diction, the same well-calculated movements of the actors that go on, but suddenly one distinguishes strange husky cries superimposed on top of everything else, two voices that call to each other, address each other across the space of the play. No, more than two – a multitude of voices with their guttural, rough sound. The archaic chant that hits us, seizes us, wounds us from inside. That primaeval plasma, that molten magma of sounds, and that obscure throat which produces the chant, that harsh voice reminding us of the terrible grating of a carriage collecting dead bodies after the outbreak of the plague. The chorus, sometimes separating into two antiphonous parts, sometimes sticking together once again like drops of mercury that cannot exist separately and ever try to dissolve into a single lake of greyish liquid, into a single flow which murmurs and beats against the world of the living beings... It's only there that the fear arrives, because the very element of the chorus is that of the world of the dead. The molten mass of those who already departed, of those who form the very foundation of our culture and our memory. Down there, in the kingdom of lost souls, one can no longer distinguish separate beings; swollen up by that fermenting yeast, smudged images and obscure sounds flow freely, connecting different entities. When Achilles has his dream, when Patrocles comes to pay him a visit, it's the whole chorus that pours out on the stage, and the incantation of a dead friend: "Bury me, bury me, so that I can enter the kingdom of Hades" is articulated by all that humid and morbid unity of the dead. The dusk of the archaic, but also the image of our culture as a whole: all those initial meanings, all those archetypes that

were created by our ancestors. Vassiliev, who with that magnificent infantile carelessness insults in passing all philologists, all historians, Vassiliev who intones: “Oh you, you who feed on the dead, you, the grey moles nourished on the decomposing flesh of long-forgotten words!” But what to do: aren’t we all standing on the shoulders of the previous generations? Aren’t we all walking freely on top of those dangerous swamps of burnt down and rotting lives? That is what it amounts to, Vassiliev’s singular interpretation of the wonderful choruses of Vladimir Martynov (that composer had already written music for his other shows, namely, for *The Lamentations of Jeremiah* and *Mozart and Salieri*).

Now, I think, it becomes much clearer where the hero of antiquity is ultimately coming from. There are those two worlds that touch each other, that brush against each other. On the one hand, there is that nether, “other” world that is fermented by the intoxicating alcohol of the Moon, of the fog, of the morbid and exciting trances of Dionysos. It’s on this shaky, swaying base, on that chthonic abyss that we try to construct “this” world of our limited, childish rationality. As a protuberance in a solar crown, an individual consciousness, a separate personality emerges from that magma – be it Achilles, or Hector, or else any modern man, he stands up proudly for a short moment and then sinks down again, being swallowed up by the same mouth, disappearing into the same throat, being ground into fine flour by the same mill. That impressive hero, so brave, so disciplined, with all his beautifully precise gestures – for a short moment there is the archetype that surfaces out of all our most murky dreams. As if a giant spoon is drawing out an image, a notion, a being from that kettle, and the gesture is being repeated again and again – a solitary wave that follows the Moon, a hero who follows a divinity, Achilles being guided by Athena. Here, in our world, everything exists separately, just like the different words inside a cutting rhythm of an ‘affirmative intonation’; and the hero caresses his sword, his lance, perhaps even his horse won in tournament, but he would never dare to approach another human being too closely. Where on the way have we lost Briseida – the cause and reason of Achilles’ monumental anger? After all, the enemies promised to give her back to him! Somewhere near that 23rd Canto they are sleeping together again – and so what? Where is Helen? What do they fight for with such fury? Who knows! The duty of a warrior, that special virtue of a Kshatriya, of a Samurai... Only death unites everybody, glues up everything, and Achilles is going to cut his hair and make a promise to Patroclus: our bones will forever be lying together.

But apart from that almost tangible sensation of the archaic mystery, apart from that vision of classical antiquity perched dangerously on top of the heavy breathing of the dead, on the chant of the chthonic depths, Vassiliev suggests the notion of a perspective, the notion of that vector directed towards the future, where death itself loses its absolute power. While our courageous heroes are mutually killing each other on the stage, using every implement, every mortal gadget ever invented (starting from bows and arrows and finishing with revolvers and machine-guns), we suddenly see a female figure traversing the battlefield. A violet cape, a child held with such gentleness – all that iconography only too well known, only too recognisable... What is she doing there, the Virgin Mary, who needs her mercy, her humility? And the child, a plastic doll, is eventually torn out of her arms, cut in two. Desperate, she continues on her way, clasping in agony her empty, fragile

hands. But at the back of the stage there appears another woman, with yet another doll... Such an obstinate, such a futile gesture... Several months before the tragedy of Beslan, Vassiliev has already dreamed out that monstrous image of naked dead children carried around in baskets and boxes, gathered in piles with huge spades, pushed under the benches, but the Virgin Mary, like the ultimate choephore, still walks on with the same offering, with the same sacrifice.

Of course, one cannot find in Homer that passionate wish to transcend death. But Homer could not know that antiquity, which is deeply rooted in darkest layers of archaic element, from the other side would touch a totally novel entity. He could not yet know that human obedience would find itself a new Master to follow, or that all this seductive attraction of death would no longer remain an intoxicating potion which poisons our imagination but would become simply a step towards that reality which one day, as promised, we would see clearly, face to face.

It's difficult to call it a theatre experiment – rather, one could speak of a return to archaic structures. There is a well dug to reach the underground waters, to link with that primeaval ocean of poetical speech, which demands its own phonetics and its own rhythms. A prominent French theatre director Claude Régy evokes the same dark waters of speech with all their magic powers. Oh rather no, after all, it's not entirely precise. It might be a question of taste, of having to choose between elements, but in Régy's *Variations sur la mort* after Jon Fosse or in his most recent *Psalms of David* we can immediately imagine that trickle of cold water which drips with its own hypnotic rhythm, drawing us inside that relentless oscillation. The goal is the same, but with Vassiliev, instead of water, one could rather envisage air and fire. There is that cupping glass where one introduces a swab of cotton drenched in alcohol, there is a match struck and then, following a little tongue of flame, there is our poor flesh which is sucked inside that rarefied air, swamped inside that space burnt out by fire, there is all our poor body which follows the fiery trace of the speech. As I've already said – nothing to do with an intellectual approach, rather, something like a perfectly tangible physical experience...

And just a couple of words in conclusion. There is in Vassiliev that amazing capacity to transform verbal suggestions into carnal images. And according to him, it's something that can be taught – or at least transmitted. For several months already he has been heading the Department of Theatre Directing at ENSATT (Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Techniques du Théâtre) in Lyon. From the very beginning he has introduced the dialogues of Plato as a kind of essential grammar for his students. And again, it's not so much Platonic ideas that matter, he tries to use those texts to teach the basic, ping-pong functioning of a dialogue as such. During that first year the students also play treatises on art (essays of Oscar Wilde, Gordon Craig, of Dolce, Piranesi, Stendhal, Fénelon, Lorca, Pirandello, Sarraute, Koltès, Dubiillard and many others). There are free improvisations around Molière's *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, when future theatre directors create scenes that remind one of jazz jam-sessions. The most recent task was to try and combine Plato with Magritte... I am quite lucky, because I can follow the process day after day: we laugh, and cry, and become exasperated, or excited, or fascinated – it's never dull, it does not ever become a lofty and scholarly theatre recitation. And for me, the most precious thing about all that is a little nervous laughter that accom-

panies every trick, every circus number which is produced with such vertiginous lightness – a little laughter of joy and astonishment which is ultimately the only proof of the successful séance of completely unexplainable magic one witnesses.